



*HEA-Erusk* (1990) by Frances Barth. Acrylic on canvas. 64 x 66 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

sional world of deep space and strong contrast with the reality of thin color on a two-dimensional surface. That is, of course, as simple and as complex a notion of what painting is as anyone could formulate. (It kept Diebenkorn's hero, Matisse, fully occupied for his entire life as a painter.) John Elderfield's essay in the beautifully produced Whitechapel catalogue is a provocative discussion of this endlessly challenging concept. As he did in his splendid piece in the *Matisse in Morocco* catalogue, Elderfield sensitively probes the tension between the literal material from which art is made and the artist's perceptions. Diebenkorn's work appears to test the expressive possibilities of a mysterious zone somewhere between the stuff of art and intention, between the fact of paint and illusion, however veiled. The seriousness with which he has addressed this formidable task for the past thirty years can elicit only profound respect and admiration.

The challenges Diebenkorn addresses in his work are, I suspect, what Frances Barth means when she speaks of "the big questions." Certainly her exhibition at the Tenri Gallery in September and October would bear out this assumption. Barth's recent work grapples with seemingly contradictory conceptions of the canvas as inviolable expanse and as window into illusory space. In her best works, she warps and twists space, apparently as we look, seducing us with an elegant touch across the surface, and then leading us effortlessly into a fictive landscape. It's like having a limitless view spread at our feet and being able to fly out into it. I don't mean to suggest that there is anything tricky or facile about Barth's paintings, nor that there is anything literal about her imagery. Quite the opposite. Her references are acute but fleeting, like things seen in dreams. Barth's pictures are intelligent, thoughtful improvisations that seem to pit the history of Western illusionism against Western modernism, with a suggestion of Eastern space thrown in for good measure – not to mention a powerful sense of personal, if wordless, narrative. All of this is a very clumsy way of saying that they are extremely individual, sometimes puzzling pictures that reward our attention. Economical in color, with a plentiful use of white that somehow reads as space, modest in size, Barth's canvases are rich and satisfying.

A notably different notion of what painting can be, albeit from an artist of completely another generation, was offered by Philippe Daverio Gallery's "Mark Tobey in the 1950s," in October. Tobey's hermetic, inward-turning pictures are neither commentaries on the world nor on the conventions of painting itself, but private meditations. The selection at Daverio was outstanding – mostly small paradigmatic pictures from what are often regarded as Tobey's best years. In some, the celebrated "white writing" – his automatist scrollings of white line – coiled across the page, fraying off at the edges, like textiles crocheted out of light. It was